

Thai government's deal with protesters breaks down

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An agreement reached last week between the Thai government and the opposition United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) appears to have collapsed after opposition protesters made new demands and refused to disperse. Thousands of UDD demonstrators remain encamped at a fortified protest site in the Ratchaprasong commercial district of Bangkok, surrounded by troops and police.

UDD leaders last week agreed to a proposal by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to dissolve parliament and hold elections on November 14. The plan included a five-point reconciliation package: respect for the monarchy, social reforms, an independent media body and unspecified constitutional amendments. The UDD leadership, however, clearly had difficulty convincing thousands of demonstrators, mainly from the rural north and northeast, to end their two-month protest.

Last Sunday, UDD leaders demanded that Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban present himself to police to face criminal charges for his part in the failed attempt by security forces on April 10 to break up a protest site at Phan Fah bridge. Ensuing street battles left 25 dead and more than 850 injured. Suthep did report on Tuesday to the Department of Special Investigation, which is handling an inquiry into the April 10 violence, but protesters dismissed the gesture as a trick.

Yesterday the government cancelled plans to hold elections on November 14 after issuing an ultimatum the previous day for the protesters to disperse. The prime minister's secretary, Korbsak Sabhavas, told the Thai Public Broadcasting Service that the government would continue to carry out its duties until

the end of its term next year, but would go ahead with the five-point reconciliation plan.

The government's Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES) announced that water, power and mobile phone services would be cut off to the Ratchaprasong protest site from midnight last night and warned residents to leave the area. CRES spokesman Colonel Sansern Kaewkamnerd said: "This is the beginning of measures to fully enforce the law."

The threat was met by defiance. UDD organiser Aree Krainara told the press that the protest site had its own generators and water supply. UDD leader Chatuporn Prompan was quoted by the BBC as saying: "If you want to crackdown you're welcome any time. We will fight to the death."

The cutoffs have not been enforced so far, although security forces have tightened their control over transport in the protest area. Colonel Sansern told the media that the military would "not use force at this stage," leaving open the option of a future crackdown.

The apparent collapse of last week's deal only heightens the country's protracted political crisis. Bitter factional infighting within the Thai ruling elites over the past four years has drawn in layers of the urban and rural poor, who have begun to voice their own demands.

The UDD is aligned with former prime minister and telecom billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in September 2006 and is currently in exile. When the army relinquished control and held national elections in late 2007, the pro-

Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) emerged as the largest party and formed the government. Anti-Thaksin protests erupted in 2008 and culminated in the occupation of Bangkok's airports. Abhisit and his Democrat Party were installed in December 2008, with the backing of the military, after a court ruling banned the PPP on the grounds of election malpractice,

The country's traditional ruling elites—the monarchy, the army and the state bureaucracy—had backed Thaksin's election in 2001, but turned on him after he failed to fulfill promises to protect Thai businesses and continued to open up the economy to foreign investment. Thaksin's methods of rule also cut across long-standing networks of patronage, on which top army officers and state bureaucrats had come to rely. He gained a following among the rural poor through a series of limited handouts as part of his stimulus measures to revive the economy.

The current UDD protests began in March after a court in February stripped Thaksin of \$US1.4 billion of his \$2.3 billion in personal assets over corrupt practices while in office. The UDD called for an immediate dissolution of parliament and an early election, which it calculated that Puea Thai, the latest incarnation of the pro-Thaksin party, would win.

The protests, however, have involved tens of thousands of the urban and rural poor, who have displayed considerable determination and fought street battles with troops on April 10, compelling them to retreat. In the northeast, pro-UDD supporters have blockaded rail lines and roads to prevent troops and police being shifted to Bangkok. Last weekend, thousands more "red shirted" protesters poured into the Ratchaprasong protest site in Bangkok.

The government and the military are clearly concerned that the violent suppression of the Bangkok protest would trigger broader social unrest in the north and northeast of the country. While lacking a coherent political program, various protesters have over the past two months voiced concerns about social inequality and their impoverished conditions that go well beyond the demand for an early election. Concerned that the protest was getting out of their control, the UDD

leaders agreed to the compromise deal with Abhisit but appear unable to convince their supporters to end the protest.

The continuing political standoff is provoking anxieties internationally that the unrest could spread to other countries in South East Asia. The US has held a number of meetings with key leaders, including from the pro-Thaksin faction. US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell met with two of Thaksin's former top ministers—Jaturon Chaisaeng and Noppadon Pattama—over breakfast on Sunday. The government had been invited but pulled out of the discussion at the last minute.

Campbell publicly backed the government-UDD deal, saying: "We strongly welcome the Prime Minister's roadmap for national reconciliation and commitment for new elections. We are also encouraged by the UDD's positive response to the roadmap. Restraint and foresight are critical for both sides at this time." While the US has denied partisanship, articles in the *Bangkok Post* and *Asia Times* website have pointed out that Washington has been feeding intelligence on the UDD protests to Thai security forces.

The inability of the government and UDD leadership, supported by the US and other major powers, to push through their agreement and end the protests is a measure of the country's extreme social tensions, which find no resolution within the existing political framework. While efforts will no doubt be made behind the scenes to revive the deal, the crisis is set to intensify in the days ahead.



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